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ABSTRACT

The Experimental Program in Elementary Education (EXEL) at Shepherd College in West Virginia began in 1973 with authorization by the West Virginia State Department of Education. The program was developed with the hope of producing more confident and competent teachers. EXEL provides continuous field experience from the second semester of the sophomore year through a final six weeks of student teaching. Questionnaires administered to students, cooperating teachers, and principals associated with EXEL demonstrated that students completing the EXEL program were more confident and better prepared than students completing a traditional program. Data also indicated that the program proved to be a realistic screening process and a means of establishing and encouraging communication between public school teachers and college methods instructors. (DMT)

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AN EXPERIMENT IN FIELD-BASED ELEMENTARY TEACHER EDUCATION

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AN EXPERIMENT IN FIELD-BASED ELEMENTARY TEACHER EDUCATION

In response to requests from students that they have more direct experience with children in public schools prior to their actual student teaching, Shepherd College, with authorization by the West Virginia State Department of Education, began in the spring of 1973 an experimental program in elementary education (EXEL) which was operated in addition to their traditional program. The program was based on the following hypotheses: (1) Contact with children in public schools early in the teacher education process concurrent with theory and methods courses would result in more confident, competent teachers. (2) Early and systematic participation in public school classrooms would help students become more realistic about their aspirations, i.e., the program would be a realistic screening process. (3) Continuous supervision and counseling by both college and public school personnel over a long period of time would enhance the personal growth and development of the potential teacher. (4) A variety of field experiences in different settings (open, traditional, rural, urban) would broaden the options open to prospective teachers as well as provide a sound background for making choices. (5) The extended field experience would encourage closer cooperation and communication between public school teachers and college methods instructors.

EXEL provided continuous field experience from the second semester of the sophomore year through a final six weeks of student

teaching. The integrated methods was abandoned and a series of five special methods seminars running concurrently with full-day experience in the public schools was devised. The students began one day's field experience each week and a seminar in physical education activities the second semester of their sophomore year. In following semesters, the subject matter of seminars changed to social studies, math and science, language arts and reading, music and art, with the field experience increasing to two full days in the second semester of the junior year. The final semester involved ten weeks of two days per week participating followed by six weeks of full-time student teaching. During the field experience, the student was expected to participate as an instructional aide with specific responsibilities for conducting learning experiences in the various subject matter areas being taught in the seminar.

Participation in the program was voluntary. Several orientation sessions were held in the fall of 1972 and by spring 1973, eighteen students had indicated their interest in the program. By the end of that semester, six had dropped out--two because they found the program too demanding on their time, one decided teaching was not for her, and one was counseled to leave because of what appeared to be lack of commitment. The remaining twelve stayed to complete the program this spring.

A second group of thirteen began in the spring of 1975. Of this group, one dropped out. The third group increased to twenty-two. To date we have lost two in this group, one by death and one

because of lack of interest.

Twenty-three schools in Jefferson, Berkeley, and Morgan counties of West Virginia and Washington County, Maryland, have served as field locations for EXEL students. Most of these schools are in small towns or semi-rural areas. One is quite typical of Appalachia, a truly mountain school. Some of the schools in Washington County are in the suburbs of Hagerstown, a small city of 85,000 people. In some schools, the black population was quite high; in others, practically nonexistent. Six were very modern open classroom buildings. In some schools there was an abundance of instructional materials; in others, hardly any. An effort was made to have every student experience both upper and lower elementary levels and open and traditional classrooms.

Because of limited staffing at the college level, it was necessary to depend heavily on feedback from public school cooperating teachers. Evaluation sheets were devised and revised. In addition to describing the participation experiences of the students, the cooperating teachers were asked each semester about the professional potential of the student and whether he should be encouraged to continue in the program.

RESEARCH DATA

To test the confidence and competence of EXEL as perceived by the graduating EXEL seniors themselves as compared to graduates in our traditional program, the Teacher Assurance Index, a questionnaire designed to assess the student teacher's feelings of security

and preparedness as he/she approached various teaching tasks, was administered to all students assigned to student teaching in the spring semester 1975. Fifteen statements dealing with such factors as preparing tests, lesson plans, understanding of developmental needs, verbalizing rationale for grading, individualizing instruction, knowledge of curriculum materials, etc. required the student to check a five-point rating scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The scores were then weighted, assigned 5 points to the most positive rating and 1 to the least positive. Scores for EXEL students were identified and compared with those of students in the traditional program. EXEL represented one-third of the group. Since the total number was small (thirty-three), no attempt was made to apply tests for significance of difference. However, mean and median scores seem to show some interesting differences. Total possible score was 75.

Mean of the total group (33)	55.69
Mean for EXEL	60.18
Mean for students in traditional program	53.50
Median for total group	57
Median for EXEL	62
Median for traditional group	55

Results from this questionnaire seem to confirm our first hypothesis that earlier classroom experience does indeed result in more confident, competent teachers.

A second questionnaire submitted to principals and cooperating teachers responsible for the twelve graduating seniors attempted to measure competence in terms of how the EXEL student teachers compared with other student teachers they had had in the past. They were asked to rate EXEL students on a list of nine qualities we had identified as being important for success as a teacher in terms of whether they exhibited these qualities not as well as, as well as, or better than other students they had supervised. Results follow:

	Not as well as	As well as	Better than
1. Academic Background	0	48%	52%
2. Knowledge and Use of Good Teaching Methods	0	48	52
3. Creative Input	0	57	43
4. Confidence, Self-assurance	5	30	65
5. Professionalism	5	45	50
6. Cooperation-Teamwork	5	52	43
7. Emotional Stability	9	67	24
8. Discipline	15	52	33
9. Overall performance	9	24	67

Note that in the area of confidence and self-assurance, these results confirmed the students' own self-evaluation.

Another questionnaire sent to all principals and cooperating teachers who had been associated with EXEL during the past three years concerned working relationships and integration of off-campus

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with campus experience. We attempted to measure the perceptions of public school personnel as to their roles, the role of the college supervisor, the communication between the college and the public schools, and the variety of experiences the students had. Respondents were asked to check highly successful, average success, or little, or no success concerning 21 descriptive statements. The results are too lengthy to be included in this abstract. Interested readers are directed to the complete manuscript available from Shepherd College.

Briefly, however, several important perceptions emerged. Principals, as a whole, responded very positively to questions concerning working relationships with the college; cooperating teachers, not so positively. Concerning data on integration of on-campus and field practicum experiences for EXEL students, both principals and teachers felt that the program had been highly successful in providing practical experience in observation, teaching, planning, analysis of reading level and math skills, use of media and materials, and conducting some of the non-instructional tasks of the teacher. It was obvious from some responses that there is need for more communication concerning expectations.

SUMMARY

Results of the research seems to confirm the first hypothesis that earlier participation in the public school experience could result in more confident, competent teachers. While there was

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some evidence of closer cooperation and communication between college and public schools, it would seem that there is room for improvement here.

Subjective evaluations by participants through their logs and final evaluations seem to show satisfaction with the personal growth and development of the EXEL students. The fact that two students left the program when they decided teaching was not for them and two others were counseled out because of lack of commitment would seem to suggest that the hypothesis concerning the program being a realistic screening process was confirmed.

The reader is referred to a detailed description and evaluation of this approach to teacher education available from Margaret H. Swann, Division of Education, Shepherd College, Shepherdstown, W. Va. 25443.

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